

Runaway and Homeless Youth: Changing the Discourse by Legitimizing Youth Voice

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Statement of Research Problem

Each year an estimated 1.0 – 2.8 million American youth run away from home, are thrown out of their homes, or otherwise end up homeless (Fernandes, 2007; National Collaboration for Youth, 2006; National Crime Justice Reference Service, 2002; Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001). The magnitude of these numbers is better understood when compared with that of entire U.S. foster care system; approximately 500,000 children each year.

The risks runaway and homeless youth (RHY) are exposed to when on the street are even more concerning. Studies consistently report that running away from home dramatically increases the risk of victimization, both physically and sexually (Fisher & Wilson, 1995; Kurtz, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 1991; Rew, 2008; Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce, 2004). Additionally, research has shown that youth living on the streets exhibit higher rates of substance abuse, suicide attempts, pregnancy, and death (Fisher & Wilson, 1995; Roy, Haley, Leclerc, Sochanski, Boudreau & Boivin, 2004; Rew, 2008; Stiffman, 1989b; Thompson, Zittel-Palamara & Forehand, 2005; Yoder, Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2003). Because RHY find themselves lacking skills and resources necessary to fully engage in employment, they are left with few legally permissible options for survival (Thompson et al., 2001).

Complicating this social problem is that the vast majority of RHY reject the services designed to meet their needs and keep them safe (Garrett, Higa, Phares, Peterson, Wells, & Baer, 2008; Slesnick, Dashora, Letcher, Erdem, & Serovich, 2009). This dynamic exacerbates an already perilous situation for RHY. Moreover, the complexities associated with the RHY population such as age, pathways to running away and/or homelessness, mental health, abuse, neglect, etc. make this a challenging area of work. Yet understanding these complexities is critical to helping the field of social work develop and improve interventions, programs, and prevention strategies that will actually

be used by this uniquely vulnerable population. This study sought to understand what specific elements of RHY programs might improve service-utilization rates.

This study is twofold. First, focus group data were collected from 14 focus groups at seven federally funded RHY agencies. Youths' responses to questions about program design and program philosophy were recorded then transcribed. Next, RHY were hired to analyze the focus group data (referred to as 'CEY'). Secondly, this study assessed what can be learned from collaborating with youth in this manner (referred to as 'PAR').

Research Questions

This study asked two research questions; 1) according to youth, what are programs doing right in regards to services being provided to RHY and, 2) what can be learned by employing youth analysts in research?

Research Methods

The tenets of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and participatory action research (PAR) (McIntyre, 2008; Stringer, 2007) suggest youth will provide depth and understanding to the interpretation of focus group data not possible for adult researchers. Additionally, because PAR includes participants, projects become more significant and meaningful, increasing the likelihood that communities will utilize findings (Turnbull, Friesen, and Ramirez, 1998). Specific to this project, PAR places the youth in the role of being responsible for the content and the researcher is merely the catalyst, providing structure, writing up the findings, and responsible for making this a healthy and safe process for the youth thereby privileging the theoretical sensitivity of youth analysts over those of adult or academic views.

To facilitate building a team of youth analysts with backgrounds similar to the RHY population, purposive sampling methods were employed. Five youth, age 18 - 24, who were currently or had previously participated in a transitional living program or drop-in center were recruited and paid \$15 per hour for the research team, which was referred to as the Youth Advisory Group (YAG).

Content analysis was used to examine focus group transcripts (Berg, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Babbie, 2001). There were two phases to the content analysis, the descriptive phase and the interpretive phase. The descriptive analysis, performed by this researcher, organized the focus group transcripts by agency, by question, then by the type of program where the focus group occurred; e.g. basic center, street outreach, etc. (Patton, 2002).

YAG members conducted the interpretive phase where, "meanings are extracted..., comparisons are made, creative frameworks for interpretation are constructed, conclusions are drawn, significance is determined, and, in some cases,

theory is generated” (Patton, 2002, p. 465). Members were provided transcripts, one question at a time. The analysts would then take those transcripts with them and analyze them, coding for concepts. Then, members would bring the coded transcripts back to the next meeting and present their findings to the group. After all group members presented their individual findings, this researcher facilitated a discussion to identify meaning and major themes that emerged from the individual analyses (Garrett, et al., 2008). At the end of this meeting, analysts were provided transcripts for the next question and a subsequent meeting was scheduled. This process continued until all the questions had been analyzed.

Finally, a focus group was conducted with the youth analysts. The goal was to evaluate the participatory methods that had been employed, determine specific features that had worked well, and seek ways in which the process could be improved.

Results

CEY focus group findings

Many of the findings reported from this study confirm previous research. Yet, because RHY conducted the analysis, there is added validity. Additionally, youth analysts provided specific details that hold potential to improve service utilization rates.

Findings suggest there should be an emphasis on life skills building versus social skills. Also, while mental health and substance abuse treatment were noted as important, family mediation should also be provided. Additionally, programs must focus on developing extensive community networks to provide customized services and recreational activities should be an integral part of any RHY program model.

Yet, *how* services are provided is, perhaps, even more critical than the actual service. The program environment, the manner in which staff enforce program rules, and respecting youth autonomy were all identified as critical. Findings noted that staff who are resourceful, model healthy behavior, develop personal connections with the youth, are non-judgmental, and have knowledge of youth issues will provide youth with the best possible chance at success.

PAR findings

A project such as this provides multiple learning opportunities for participants. This study found that teamwork is a significant component of that learning. Explicitly, analysts understood how individual differences allowed for a deeper understanding of the data to emerge. They also learned that working as a team improved the analysis and enhanced their own personal growth, which, in turn, improved the overall project. Moreover, youth stated they learned to enjoy the experience of research.

This study also found that separating the analysis into *individual analysis* and *collective work* was especially helpful. *Individual analysis* provided team members time to thoroughly read each document, make notes, and code the data all at their own pace. *Individual analysis* also provided time for analysts to provide “voice” to the transcript. The *collective work* provided a safe forum for presenting their individual analysis, and then establishing consensus as to the importance of those findings.

Additional findings beyond the research question

Team members exhibited an immense amount of *pride* throughout the performance of this project. Analysts repeatedly stated how important they felt this work was to the field and took personal ownership of this responsibility. While team members felt as if they were back in school, they stated it was different, prompting them to inquire about opportunities for higher education. Improvement in these areas suggests an enhancement in social capital, which is critical for successful transition to adulthood for all youth (Laser & Leibowitz, 2009; Markward, McMillian, & Markward, 2003) and has been specifically shown to reduce a variety of maladies in homeless youth (Bantchevska, Bratle-Haring, Dashora, Glebova, & Slesnick, 2008).

These findings strongly supports Stringer’s (2007) claim that that the level of participation directly affects a participant’s willingness to engage with the project. The opportunity to accomplish tasks that feel important is critical to effective participation. Additionally, although PAR methods imply that participants must be involved throughout the entire process, this study demonstrated that there may be multiple ways to conduct PAR that will still provide improved benefits. Similar outcomes could be expected if youth were allowed to participate in other areas of service/program development and research.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Practice

Youth workers must insure they are providing the right service using the appropriate method (the ‘how’), otherwise, there is an increased likelihood for negative outcomes or that youth will simply not engage in the process. As such, training modules on effective relationship building and power sharing with RHY need to be developed and emphasized. Moreover, formerly homeless young people should be included in the development of these modules and compensated for their work. Additionally, youth worker training should emphasize structural barriers that RHY face and move away from the pathology of RHY. Finally, partnering with youth in meaningful ways and privileging their voice holds potential to be valid across other youth serving systems.

Policy

With the confusion surrounding definitions, inaccuracies in census data, limitations around intervention effectiveness studies, and poor utilization rates, it seems prudent to call for a White House Conference on Better Futures for RHY. With a focus on bottom-up system redesign, this conference would invite youth, researchers, and practitioners to develop new ways of thinking about and responding to the needs of RHY. For example, the populations of youth who are “runaway” and “homeless” should be separated in policy as well as programs and practices, and new federal policy should be detached from Juvenile Delinquency policy (Glassman, Karno, & Erdem, 2010).

Primarily, federal research policy needs to support expanded research in the area of RHY. Concurrently, both private and public funding sources for RHY services and research should require the inclusion of youth.

Conclusion

Findings from this study indicate there are key services that are important to runaway and homeless youth who access them. Findings also indicate that RHY services should focus on *how* services are being provided as much as *what* they are providing. Additionally, focus group youth described characteristics of individual staff that were important contributors to success when working with RHY. In light of these findings and the methods utilized, future research must seek out ways to collaborate with runaway and homeless youth on research projects and create evaluations of RHY services. Providing youth with meaningful opportunities to participate in the development of these projects and programs will unquestionably provide the insight necessary to move the field of RHY services beyond its current limited impact.

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